Europe Crosses the Rubicon

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The so-called “European Neighborhood Policy” has, so far, been a curious thing. There is much talk about it in the European Union, but little practical effect. It was meant as an alternative to the ever-increasing number of accession rounds, say, involving the countries in the southern Caucasus. But the war in Lebanon and its consequences have caused a sudden and fundamental change in the leisurely pursuit of this policy.

The Lebanon War has served as a harsh reminder to the European Union that it has “strategic interests” – security interests first and foremost – and that, should it choose to ignore them, the price will be high. Moreover, the division of labor between the US and Europe isn’t functioning in the time-tested manner of old: the ongoing war in Iraq is gnawing at America’s military capabilities and resulted in a crisis of moral and political legitimacy of the US across the Arabic/Islamic world.

With the decision of its member states to send several thousand so ldiers to Lebanon to implement the UN cease-fire resolution 1701, the European Union has taken the most significant decision yet within its Neighborhood Policy. Can the EU in fact be able to emerge as a stabilizing political force in the most dangerous area of conflict within Europe’s immediate geopolitical neighborhood?

After the Balkan Wars of the 1990’s, the Near and Middle East is at once the most dangerous and also – given security considerations – the most important neighboring region for the EU toda y. Why? Because the main threats to European security at the beginning of the 21st century stem from that region. The threats concentrated in the Middle East are diverse: regional conflicts, totalitarian religious ideologies, terrorism, nuclear armament programs, blockades to modernization, unstable regimes and hegemonic ambitions.

If one asks what interests the EU and its member states have in this crisis-riddled region, the answer is, that certainly European energy and economic interests are at stake, as well as the vital interests of Europe’s partners and allies (Israel in particular). But first and foremost on the list are Europe’s. How the Middle East develops will determine the extent of the risks for, or even probable challenges to, Europe’s security. Success in containing, or indeed resolving, the conflict there will have overwhelmingly positive consequences for Europe’s security.

The Middle East today is defined by three central conflicts: the Israeli-Arab conflict, Iraq, and Iran. The fusion of Iran’s nuclear program (and Iran’s hegemonic ambitions) with the situation in Iraq and with Hezbollah in Lebanon will lead to a “New Middle East” which, in all likelihood, will provoke a major confrontation. This will involve far more than just the usual regional actors and conflicts. The war in Lebanon has made it abundantly clear how far this dangerous process has already progressed.

The mission in Lebanon is a high-risk one for the UN force, and for Europe in particular. The war did not bring forth a real decision. Neither Hezbollah nor Syria, let alone Iran, have any interest in the UN mission’s success. The Security Council resolution presupposes – in addition to separating the combatants – the enforcement of the internal and external sovereignty of Lebanon’s elected government of Lebanon, without saying how this is to be accomplished with a politically strengthened Hezbollah, militarily superior to the Lebanese forces.

Any attempt at disarming Hezbollah by the UN force would mean a war with Hezbollah (and with Syria and Iran in the background) -- a task the UN force cannot accomplish. But were it to resign itself to mere observer status in Lebanon, the UN and Europe would lose all credibility. Moreover, it is likely that, within a few months, UN soldiers would once again find themselves between the firing lines of the conflicting parties. The mission therefore will have to walk the thin and risky line in pursuit of its robust mandate to stabilize the country. Failure will be a constant danger and the military risk will be high. Yet, in light of the situation there is no better alternative.

In view of the risk to its troops, Europe will be compelled to influence and even proactively bring about strategic changes to the political environment in the entire Middle East. With its decision in favor of the mission in Lebanon, the EU crossed a military Rubicon. It must now back up its growing weight in the Middle East with political initiative. This must include three key elements: a negotiated solution for Syria; a resumption of negotiations between Israel and the
Palestinians; and a common strategic understanding with the US of the political strategy of the West for the region (which addresses the region’s most dangerous conflict, Iran). This common understanding will be the pivotal challenge for the future of the transatlantic relationship.

For Europe and its troops, the stakes in Lebanon are very high. But this is about vital European interests. War and chaos in the Middle East or just a moral or political vacuum will directly affect and upset the security of the EU and all its member states. Europe therefore had to act, though that decision was obviously difficult. The key question in the near future will be whether Europe actually has the military and political capabilities, the political staying power, and the common will to act in accordance with its core interests in the Middle East. We will see. In any case, one thing can already be said: Welcome to the real world.

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